

Barack Obama's in London: "it's the perception stupid"

(Guest blog)

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Barack Obama is in town. Polis Summer School student Emma Lofgren reports. You'd better watch out, you'd better not cry, you'd better make sure you've got a clean pair of knickers to throw at him when he arrives at No 10. For such is the world of celebrity and, by extension, politics. Or was it the other way around?




Certainly there is a danger for a politician of being admired for your winning smile rather than your economic plan. Admiration is flighty and the gloss of celebrity can backfire, exposing you to ridicule. Tony Blair did, in his days, feature in enough political cartoons to be able to give that particular sermon. However, it should be noted (and not only noted, but underlined, highlighted, and circled in red) that he still managed to win three elections.

It seems that Gordon Brown has a thing or two to learn, both from his predecessor (a faint cry of "Alastair, come back, all is forgiven" echoes in the corridors of Whitehall) and Mr Obama. Though comparing American and British politics is rather like mixing apples and kumquats, the Prime Minister ought, if nothing else, to let his aides have a wee glance at Team Obama's manual "how to actually kind of sort of in a manner of speaking at least *pretend* to want to win the next election". A bit of celebrity lustre isn't such a bad thing after all.

David Cameron (who, on a side note, has already won the contest "how to refer to oneself as a fictional character and not come across as an illiterate fool") has understood this. He has understood how to add a bit of gloss to politics (or a spoonful of sugar, if you feel more comfortable with Mary Poppins metaphors), something most politicians would do well to pay heed to. They need substance to govern, certainly, but when it comes to winning an election, substance is secondary to shine. Corrupted by the attractive glow of their vision of a better world, people vote with their hearts rather than their minds. Common sense is rare in political elections.

Gordon Brown disagrees. He continues to insist on how Cameron is just an empty shirt, how he has no real policy ideas, a Tory by any other name and so on. Hey, here's an idea – why not ask John Major how well *that* strategy has worked out in the past? "Let's cross our fingers and hope he stumbles" is not good enough a tactic to reclaim the voters' adoration. Instead, his communications staff need to get their act together and decide how, exactly, they want voters to view the prime minister. They need to worry about how Gordon Brown appears to the public, because somewhere along the way, he lost his identity to be known now only as The Right Honourable Dithery of Dithertop.

It is a truth universally acknowledged that politicians are not what they are, they are what they seem. It doesn't matter if you've got the best economic policy know to man, or a top-notch proposal for education. If the appearance isn't right, nothing is.

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